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ABSTRACT

The Report to the Surgeon General on Television and Social Behavior appears to establish that televised violence, under certain circumstances, may increase to some degree aggressive behavior in children. This finding represents a substantial advance in our knowledge, and we at American Broadcasting Company (ABC) will manage our program planning accordingly. By this coming fall, ABC will have entirely eliminated from its weekend children's schedule cartoons which depend solely on "action" and are devoid of comedy. Greater emphasis will be placed on prosocial conflict resolution, prime time programs will be more carefully evaluated and balanced, and intensified efforts will be made toward sponsoring original research relating to the effects of televised violence. To underline ABC's concern for the nation's children, it might be helpful to review our accomplishments in the last three years. We have de-emphasized violence in children's programs and made a commitment to improve the quality of children's weekend television. We sponsored the first Children's Programing Workshop, providing a forum for knowledgeable persons to discuss improvement of children's television. We intend to continue our efforts to provide children with exciting, stimulating, interesting, informative, and entertaining programs. (SH)

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STATEMENT OF

ELTON H. RULE, PRESIDENT

AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANIES, INC.

BEFORE THE

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

MARCH 23, 1972

EM 009 735

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, my name is Elton H. Rule. I am President of American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. With me this morning are James Duffy, President of the ABC Television Network, and Alfred Schneider, a Vice President of the American Broadcasting Company.

I thank you for your invitation to participate in these hearings and to present ABC's views on the recently issued Report of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior.

The Committee's task of assessing the impact of televised violence on the viewer was a most complex and difficult one. Although the basic underlying research data have not yet been made available for examination, I believe that the Report represents a carefully considered over-view and summation of the research projects concerned with the complicated question of the relationship between television viewing and violent behavior.

Although I do not have the expertise to question the complex psychological and psychiatric evaluations of the Report, I have nevertheless tried to understand the many difficult scientific and technical concepts involved, as well as the Advisory Committee's conclusions.

Many questions, some of them extremely important, remain unanswered. However, the Report does appear to establish that televised violence, under certain circumstances, may increase to some degree, aggressive behavior in some children. This finding, in itself, represents a substantial advance in our knowledge, and the industry and we at ABC will have to weigh its implications very seriously.

It is indeed unfortunate that present knowledge is insufficient to identify the children who become more aggressive when exposed to television violence. Likewise, we do not really know the size of the group so affected or the circumstances and stimuli which tend to increase aggression in children.

Nevertheless, now that we are reasonably certain that televised violence can increase aggressive tendencies in some children, we will have to manage our program planning accordingly. Based on our understanding of the Report of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, a few of our old judgments were reinforced and several new conclusions were reached:

(1) By this coming Fall, ABC will have entirely eliminated from its weekend children's schedule the type of cartoon series that depends solely on "action" and is devoid of comedy. I think the clearest way I can illustrate the substantial progress we have achieved in de-emphasizing violence in children's programming is to indicate that almost 50% of our weekend children's schedule in the 1968-69 season consisted of programs falling within the above category and that this type of series now represents less than 10% of our Saturday-Sunday morning schedules. As of next season, programs like this will be a thing of the past on ABC.

(2) Even greater emphasis is being placed on presenting children's programs which resolve conflict situations through wit, charm, intelligence and imagination.

(3) The overall balance of the different types of programs which ABC presents in prime time will be even more carefully evaluated in selecting future projects for development and series to be included in the network's prime-time schedule.

(4) When selecting a time period for new prime-time series, the program concept and, more importantly, the content of a series will also be more carefully considered in the future in terms of its possible adverse effect on children and young viewers.

(5) Substantial sums have been spent by ABC in the past two years for original research relating to the effects of televised violence, and we intend to intensify our efforts in the immediate future. Over the next four years, ABC will have expended

an additional $1,000,000 on original research in this area. The research we underwrite will include the areas which the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee indicated as most needed. The specific projects which we will sponsor are currently being discussed with our independent research consultants and we will be guided by their advice.

I assure the members of the Subcommittee that ABC has shared your concern for the nation's young people. To underline this concern, it might be helpful at this point to review more fully what ABC has accomplished for its younger audience in the three years which have elapsed since I last appeared before you.

At the outset, I would like to remind you that Saturday and Sunday mornings are programmed exclusively for children. So, naturally, our first priority was placed upon a review of the programs we presented at those times. While we were de-emphasizing violence in these

programs directed to children, we also made a continuing commitment to improve the quality of the weekend children's schedule. We have made improvement of this area of the television network's schedule one of our priority concerns. We resolved consistently to try to upgrade our children's programming.

The first new children's series of this nature to be developed by ABC was "Curiosity Shop", a one-hour weekly program which innovatively combines animation, film, live-action and music. The objective of the series, which was telecast in the 1971-72 season, was to arouse the child's natural curiosity and to involve the child in explorations that stimulate his understanding of himself and the world around him. This series is primarily aimed at the 6 to 11 age group.

Another children's series -- "Make A Wish" -- was developed by ABC News as a half-hour weekly program for the 1971-72 season. "Make A Wish" also combines information, instruction and entertainment. Each program in the series deals with

a topical development, blending current events with the imaginative flights of fancy so common to young people.

In the latter part of 1970, we decided to attempt to stimulate further industry-wide and public consideration of this all-important area of programming. As a result, the ABC Television Network sponsored the first Children's Programming Workshop in June of 1971.

The Workshop provided a forum in which knowledgeable persons, having diverse and sometimes antagonistic interests and opinions, could come together and discuss the improvement of television for children. There were over 400 participants at the two-day session. They included representatives of advertisers, advertising agencies, networks, stations, program producers and government, as well as members of religious and citizens' organizations.

At the conclusion of the Workshop, ABC prepared a booklet containing the texts of the statements delivered by the

speakers at the Conference and a summary of the roundtable discussions which were held at one session. The booklet was widely distributed to all participants at the Workshop and among various elements of the industry.

Many of the ideas advanced at the Workshop merited further exploration, experimentation and development. In retrospect, the Workshop reinforced our commitment to improve the programs we present for children. In this connection, we also sought the counsel and guidance of members of the National Education Association, as well as The Bank Street College of Education before finalizing our development plans for children's programming for the 1972-73 season.

The network's sincere efforts to achieve more sound more stimulating television for children will be apparent in our schedule next season. For example, a new series of five-minute informational programs for children, set to contemporary music backgrounds, will premiere in

January, 1973 and will be presented frequently on Saturday and Sunday mornings. These programs will respond to a basic challenge -- to convey useful information, which is likely to be assimilated by young viewers because it entertains them. The Bank Street College of Education assisted in the development of the concept for this informational series.

The network will also present a monthly series of hour-long special programs for children starting in the Fall of 1972. These programs will originate on weekdays after school hours and will contain information that will complement grade school activities and classroom work. The range of subjects will be broad, encompassing literature, science, history, current events, the arts, and physical fitness. Again as an example, one program, titled "William", starring Sir John Gielgud, Sir Ralph Richardson and Lyn Redgrave, will introduce young viewers to Shakespeare. The Bank Street College of Education is also serving as the educational advisor for this project.

Finally, "Kid Power", another new series scheduled for next season, will feature a group of children of different ethnic backgrounds who reflect divergent attitudes and perspectives. The series is being written by Morrie Turner, who was Co-Chairman of the 1970 White House Conference on Youth, and is based on his nationally syndicated comic strip "Wee Pals". Each half-hour episode will portray stories conveying such basic lessons as brotherhood, honesty, physical fitness, selflessness and the like, in an effort to combine effective learning with entertainment.

I believe that the ABC Television Network can be justifiably proud of the progress it has achieved in the area of children's programming in the past three years. I am sure you all know that the meaningful change of direction we undertook could not be effected in a single, miraculous stroke. The sometimes unpleasant reality of our industry is that basic changes take time. However, we view next season's weekend entertainment programming for children with a sense of considerable accomplishment and pride.

I do not mean to suggest that we regard our task as completed. Far from it. We intend, to the very best of our ability, to continue our efforts to provide children with exciting, stimulating, interesting, informative and entertaining programs.

Over the past two years, ABC has also sponsored on-going research into the effects of televised violence on children. ABC has retained two teams of entirely independent research consultants who are eminently qualified in this field:

One research team is Lieberman Research, Inc., under the direction of Dr. Seymour Lieberman. Dr. Lieberman and his associates have been seeking to develop instruments and techniques for measuring the degree of aggression in children. They have also been engaged in applying their techniques to the investigation of the effects of different kinds and degrees of televised violence on aggressive tendencies in children.

The other research team is composed of Dr. Melvin Heller and Dr. Samuel Polsky. They have been studying the effects on various groups of young people, including "normal", "emotionally disturbed" and "socially deprived" children, as well as imprisoned youthful offenders, of controlled exposure to violent and non-violent program materials. The studies of Dr. Heller and Dr. Polsky have focused on the observation and measurement of real behavior, both past and present, of the groups under review.

In March of 1970, executives of ABC and our research consultants met with Dr. Eli Rubenstein, then heading the special staff within the National Institute of Mental Health participating in the Surgeon General's violence study. ABC's research consultants outlined the studies they intended to initiate to Dr. Rubenstein and members of his staff. Dr. Rubenstein indicated his basic understanding of the studies being underwritten by ABC. The results of the first year of study of ABC's research consultants were also transmitted to Dr. Rubenstein to keep him informed of the progress of our research.

The two-year studies of Drs. Heller, Polsky and Lieberman will be completed in the next few months, and are regarded by ABC as the groundwork upon which to base future studies. We shall make these and future studies available to the Surgeon General.

As I previously mentioned, the Report to the Surgeon General does not provide definitive and conclusive answers as to what specific elements in television programs can be harmful to children and how these effects can be avoided or negated. The Report, however, did indicate a number of the more important unanswered questions and did suggest the direction of future research. In this respect, the Report was extremely helpful. ABC's future research efforts will include the unanswered questions indicated in the Report to the Surgeon General as well as other aspects recommended by our consultants.

In addition to our continuing original research into the effects of televised violence on younger viewers, we have retained Drs. Heller, Polsky and Lieberman as

consultants to keep us advised of all new research findings and published materials germane to the subject of television portrayal of violence. We will rely on these competent experts to interpret meaningful developments in this field, irrespective of source, and to assist us in designing plans for significant future research. In the future, we also intend to consult with these experts before our entertainment schedule is finalized each season.

ABC's Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices, which reviews all entertainment programming throughout the various stages of development, plays an important role in our efforts to present programs devoid of harmful violence.

The editors of this Department are responsible for applying the requirements of the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters, as well as the standards and policies of the American Broadcasting Company, to all entertainment fare presented on the

Television Network. The activities of this Department in reviewing programming are described in considerable detail in the statement which I asked Mr. Schneider, the executive to whom the Broadcast Standards Department reports, to prepare for this hearing. In the interest of conserving the Subcommittee's time, I will merely submit his statement for the record.

I would, however, like to mention briefly a few highlights of Mr. Schneider's statement which have a particular bearing on this hearing.

This past June, as has been our practice in every year since June of 1968, we reminded our Standards and Practices editors and the producers of our entertainment series of our policy with respect to the portrayal of violence in television programs. This policy prohibits the use of violence for the sake of violence and dictates that special attention be given to encourage the de-emphasis of acts of violence.

To the best of their ability, members of the Standards and Practices Department endeavor throughout every phase of production -- from script stage to final edit -- to insure that ABC programs with an adventure orientation concentrate on the solution of crime and on the apprehension of those guilty of precipitating violence. In programs of this type, by stressing the solution rather than the portrayal of the crime, we hope to combat disrespect for law and authority. We regard the "FBI" and "Mod Squad" series as excellent examples of this form of programming. Programs in these series seek to reinforce affirmative values and portray law enforcement in a professional and positive light.

Additionally, following receipt of the first year interim report of one of our research teams, we directed that our Standards and Practices editors devote special attention to the avoidance of demonstrations of criminal techniques which could invite or assist imitation. Subsequently, our concern in this area was corroborated in the Report to the Surgeon General.

As more research information becomes available in relation to televised violence, the Subcommittee may be assured that it will be applied to our program development and our program content -- particularly as directed to young people.

In summation, the findings of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee make it clear that broadcasters must be even more responsive to this problem. As I indicated previously, ABC is taking the following actions, some of which are extensions of earlier determinations:

(1) By the Fall of 1972, cartoon series which depend solely on "action" and are devoid of comedy will have been eliminated from the network's children's schedule.

(2) We are placing additional emphasis on resolving conflict in children's programs through non-violent means.

(3) The overall balance of the different types of programs in our schedule will be considered even more carefully in the future.

(4) When selecting the time periods in which new series will be scheduled in the future, greater emphasis will be focused on the possible adverse impact which the program's content might have on young viewers.

(5) ABC has budgeted $1,000,000 over the next four years for an intensified program of original research in this area.

I think, Mr. Chairman, that this demonstrates that we are making a serious and an honest attempt to meet this problem. We will continue to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to present my statement. My colleagues and I will be happy to try to answer any questions that you and the members of the Subcommittee may have.